The future and position of local P/CVE strategies and approaches

Key outcomes

As the extremist landscape in Europe is changing rapidly and factors for radicalisation have diversified, practitioners from different European countries came together to discuss the changing landscape and potential options for repositioning local strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The overall objective of the meeting was to establish an outline of the changes in the landscape, identify the challenges and offer potential recommendations for adaptation. The key outcomes were the following:

- The main changes in the extremist landscape are the intensification of polarisation in public discourse, rising online hate crimes, anti-democratic attitudes, the spread of false and hostile messages eroding trust in institutions, and the polarising attitudes towards marginalised groups.

- The main challenges identified by participants are: The local authorities' narrow mandate often limits their focus to specific extremist ideologies, securing funding for primary prevention measures that address root causes of radicalisation, and the lack of (political and social) acknowledgement regarding the significance of polarisation and discrimination in P/CVE.

- The future local P/CVE strategy needs to adopt a comprehensive and inclusive approach involving various non-security stakeholders and including 'common message' communication strategies, emotional awareness of grievances and clear legislation.

Highlights of the discussion

Current vs future extremist landscape

Eighteen different perspectives on current and future trends in the extremist landscape were discussed over the course of 2 days. Polarisation perceived in public and political discourse remains a concern that needs to be added to the P/CVE agenda and its approaches. A spike in hate crime, particularly online, with misogynistic, racist, xenophobic and homophobic tendencies is presently widespread and frequently increasing in several countries. An interesting local insight was given from the perspective of drug addiction, and the prevention thereof, as one of the leading pull factors for violent extremist behaviour as well as another local insight on rising social fragmentation leading to parallel societies. The overarching topic of discussion was the rise of anti-democratic attitudes from both citizens and politicians. Alongside this development was the indication of (targeted) false and hostile messages leading to citizens' distrust in (the legitimacy of) 'the system' (e.g. political actors, law enforcement agencies, journalists and scientists). Finally, a misinterpretation of historical events used as fuel for polarising debates and

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attitudes towards so-called out-groups (e.g. migrants, LGBTQI+ community, woke movement, etc.) was also acknowledged as a current and future factor of concern and aim for local P/CVE strategies.

Challenges for current local and regional P/CVE strategies

In the light of the current and future trends, participants discussed the difficulties of incorporating the new trends in a sustainable and effective manner in a P/CVE approach. Participants reaffirmed the strong need for a multidisciplinary and whole-of-society approach in which different partners coming from social cohesion, participation, local democracy, poverty and crime prevention backgrounds should be involved in building a future robust strategy. However, there are challenges of course, which were identified by participants and can be categorised in the following three points:

1. **The mandate for local authorities**

    At the local level, P/CVE coordinators and practitioners are often working with a strict mandate that in practice allows them to focus on specific extremist ideologies. The underlying strategies and approaches are signed off by local decision-makers (e.g. mayors, local parliament) or in some cases national political actors. This traditionally ideology- and group-focused approach is challenging for P/CVE. Extremism is not and has never been clear cut. Divisive, racist and misinformed messages, especially coming from political actors, can just as easily spark polarisation and extremism in the same manner an extremist organisation might. The ownership for P/CVE regarding topics like polarisation, hate speech and discrimination is therefore completely dependent on public appeal, public need and, consequently, public funding.

2. **Funding**

    Many participants argued that the challenge of widening the scope of P/CVE efforts is entirely related to the financial resources allocated for the work that needs to be done. In the public eye, a phenomenon like anti-LGBTQ violence can be deemed an urgent matter and can therefore receive public funding. The challenging factor remains to align allocated funding with P/CVE interests, especially taking efforts of primary prevention into consideration. As many participants reaffirmed the need for less emphasis on ideology and more on root causes, there was a realisation that primary preventive measures do not concretely align with traditional extremism prevention. Primary preventive interventions in the realm of sports, education, drug rehabilitation and art therapy do not immediately create a mental connection to preventing extremism in public opinion and therefore P/CVE funding is not always secured as easily for these types of efforts.

3. **Political and social realities**

    The reality is that most local P/CVE coordinators or practitioners are dependent on the political and societal appetite for the work that they are doing. This is the reason why many P/CVE programmes are or were primarily focused on different forms of ideological extremism. When it comes to the more fluid and hybrid forms of extremism, including the use of discriminatory narratives and (online) hate speech, participants find it increasingly more challenging to work in a political and social environment where the significance of polarisation or discrimination as part of P/CVE is not acknowledged. The so-called line for tolerated forms of activism is therefore becoming increasingly blurry, for instance when the burning of Korans is tolerated as a form of protest versus the question to what extent other forms of expression that might spark polarisation and hate are allowed. The question many of the participants were left with is: What we define as extremism might not be in accordance with the public and political reality, and if that is the case, what are our options?

Recommendations

Considering the fruitful but confronting discussion, participants were challenged to take matters into their own hands and imagine themselves in the position to make an ideal future-proof local P/CVE strategy and present their recommendations to one another. Here are the main recommendations for local authorities:

- The local context remains a significant addition to the success of a future P/CVE strategy. Participants confirmed the needs and efforts to **continuously establish strong ties with national and European actors while continuously emphasising localised efforts**. What is decided on the national level needs to be inspired by what is happening locally on the ground.

- The local P/CVE strategy needs to **focus less on ideologies and more on root causes when establishing a future robust local P/CVE strategy or approach**. Root causes like poverty, discrimination, ethical and religious tensions, (perceived or actual) government failing and divisive political rhetoric were discussed to be of main focus.

- **The future ownership should especially be organised around those root causes of an emotional nature.** Local P/CVE coordinators and practitioners should be brought in the position to understand what drives people and a society on an emotional level. There are a lot of grievances and needs. P/CVE approaches should build close cooperation with activities focusing on community participation, community policing, sports and other social initiatives to foster mutual inclusiveness, understanding and common resilience.

- **Incorporate feelings of injustice into a local P/CVE strategy.** This recommendation builds upon the latter. Participants stressed the need to educate themselves, their colleagues and local partners on how to deal with emotions on personal and political levels. Citizens who are displeased often simply want to be heard and feel like they are taken seriously.

- **A future local P/CVE strategy needs to include an educational approach focusing on democratic values and citizen rights** that can equip individuals, especially youth, with the knowledge and skills to understand democracy and reject extremist ideologies. Collaborate with local educational institutions to integrate P/CVE concepts into curricula and provide training for teachers and staff on identifying signs of radicalisation.

- **A future local P/CVE approach needs to shift away from a securitised approach towards a human rights-based and ethical approach.** This approach includes, but is not limited to, a strong communication strategy promoting accurate information, and a monitoring and evaluation system that prioritises trust and transparency.

- The **local communication strategy or 'common message'** includes communication training for all stakeholders involved on how to strategically engage with journalists or communicate in the media so that insensitivities or stigmatising statements or headlines are prevented. Invest in public communication and diplomacy competencies on a local level. This goes for practitioners, citizens and leaders.

- A society that trusts in the democratic system and its capability to meet challenges is an essential necessity for its legitimacy. **Participants see significance in increasing people's confidence in the system by creating room for accountability and transparency within the local P/CVE strategy.** This can be done by clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved, including government agencies and law enforcement. In a future P/CVE approach it must be guaranteed that the members of the society can actively participate, are integrated into political decision-making and know why decisions are made.

- There is a need for **clear legislation on the significance of hate speech, discrimination and disruptive polarising narratives in extremist modus operandi and objectives**. This could help create more clarity on measures to be taken and more political and social push for funding.

- **Continue to make use of multilateral platforms, like the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)**, in particular for the exchange of knowledge and information. There is still a great divide between European countries when it comes to knowledge and expertise for creating a local P/CVE strategy. Additionally, we should help each other with overcoming political boundaries for establishing local P/CVE strategies as well. More use of the RAN exchange programme is necessary.

Inspiring practices

BanHate app: The Office for Prevention of Extremism in Styria (Austria) has co-developed an app that can be used to report hate postings or hate crimes quickly, easily and anonymously via a smartphone or tablet. The app is an initiative to encourage civilians to take part in the monitoring of discrimination in the media. The app is available free of charge in all major app stores, and the data has been used in criminal court proceedings and can therefore help in the process of building clear legislation on the significance of hate speech in extremist modus operandi and objectives (source: www.banhate.com).

Follow-up

The outcomes of this meeting will feed into the 2023 RAN LOCAL meeting 'How can arts, the city's civic pride, and culture contribute to boosting local resilience and democracy against extremism, hate crime, and other threats to democracy?'.

Further reading

- RAN Publication, 31 May 2023: The Media and Polarisation in Europe: Strategies for Local Practitioners to Address Problematic Reporting

- ICCT, 9 June 2022: What the Zeitgeist can Tell us About the Future of Terrorism

- RAN LOCAL, 2023: How to prevent and mitigate anti-government extremism at the local level? Restoring normality, rebuilding trust and networks at the local level

- RAN LOCAL, 2021: The changing landscape of polarisation, radicalisation and extremism

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